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RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 2628
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RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2973
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 9139
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SUBJECT: ALGERIAN MFA WARY ON EVE OF ASAD VISIT

REF: SECSTATE 133148

Classified By: Ambassador David D. Pearce; reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (S) Ambassador delivered reftel demarche December 21 to the MFA Director General for Arab Affairs on the eve of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's expected visit. On foreign fighters, DG Abdelhamid Bouzaher said that the flow into Iraq had declined in recent years from a 2003-05 peak. He added that many young returning Algerian fighters had been "disillusioned" by their experience, not wanting to be used merely as suicide bombers. Ambassador noted Syria was still the main route into Iraq and Damascus needed to do more. On Iran, Bouzaher saw Syria's relationship with Iran as less one of "strategy and substance" than convenience and temporary interest. Ambassador noted that, over the years, Syria had facilitated Iranian access to Lebanon but the Syrian government was likely to listen carefully to any concerns Algeria might voice. Ambassador asked that Algeria lend its weight to pressing Syria to adopt a more positive approach to Lebanon, including the normalization of relations, which was important for the security and stability of the entire region. He also raised the need for Arab countries to normalize relations with Iraq, rather than leave the diplomatic field in Baghdad to Iran.

FOREIGN FIGHTERS "DISILLUSIONED"

¶2. (S) In Bouzaher's view, the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq has declined markedly in recent years, from a 2003-2005 peak. The Ambassador responded that any decline was relative, and the transit of foreign fighters through Syria was still a problem and the Syrian government needed to do more. Bouzaher stressed the positive Syrian step of opening its border to over a million Iraqi refugees, and said he believed Syria was today more serious about securing its frontier with Iraq. Although Bouzaher admitted he "was not an expert" on the issue, he said that many young Algerian fighters returning from Iraq were "disillusioned" by their experience, as they did not want to be used merely as suicide bombers. "This is not part of our culture," they felt, according to Bouzaher.

¶3. (S) Bouzaher said that Algeria's ties with Syria had deteriorated in recent years over the terrorism issue. The Algerian government had engaged recently with the Syrians on economic and commercial issues, but had thus far failed to conclude a bilateral security accord. Bouzaher said that Syria had shown signs lately of wanting to break out of its isolation and had evinced some good will regarding Iraq and Lebanon in particular. Today, said Bouzaher, Syria has a

"clear interest" in stable relations with Iraq. Ambassador pressed Bouzaher for specifics, saying he hoped Bouzaher was right but Syria needed to demonstrate these intentions in a more concrete manner.

INTO THE ARMS OF IRAN

14. (S) Bouzaher saw the resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict as the "key to the entire region," including all of the issues involving Syria. In the case of Iran, he said, solving this problem would rob them of their vision of a "divine mission" to reclaim Jerusalem, and therefore, by implication, make it easier for Syria to stand against Iranian support for Hizballah in Lebanon. Bouzaher saw Syria's relationship with Iran as less one of "strategy and substance" than of convenience and temporary interest. Ambassador noted that, over the years, Syria had facilitated Iranian access to Lebanon but the Syrian government was likely to listen carefully to any concerns Algeria might voice. Bouzaher repeated that Syria had been a victim of its own isolation, and said that he did not believe it had any real substantive interest in close relations with Iran. Instead, he said al-Asad wanted to improve his relations with the U.S, a desire that "was complicated" by recent cross-border U.S. military actions inside Syria.

SHI'A THREAT "FRIGHTENING"

15. (S) Ambassador asked that Algeria lend its weight to

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pressing Syria to adopt a more positive approach to Lebanon, including the normalization of relations, which was important for the security and stability of the entire region. Bouzaher stressed that Algeria had "an Arab nationalist duty" to support Lebanon and would continue to do so. He said Algeria has consistently pushed for a full investigation into the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri, but in the absence of specific proof, was not eager to blame Syria outright. Bouzaher stressed that Algeria's relationship with Syria had suffered greatly in the 1990s over the terrorism issue, but was now improving. Bouzaher believed that Syria "has intentions to normalize" relations with Lebanon, and added that Syria has to realize that the situation in Lebanon could be very damaging to Sunni interests. As Sunni Arabs, he said, Algeria found the Shi'a in Lebanon "frightening;" it was a situation not at all favorable to "our way of seeing things." Bouzaher said that the core issue in Lebanon was the arming of Hizballah, "as everyone knows."

WARILY REENGAGING ON IRAQ

16. (S) The Ambassador stressed that as an influential voice in the Arab world, it would help if Algeria was among those taking the lead on Arab re-engagement with Iraq. To not do so, he said, was damaging to stability and left the field to Iran. Iraq would endure and Iraqis would remember those who supported them in their darker days, much as Algeria remembered those who did or did not offer support during the 1990s civil war. To this, Bouzaher responded that Algeria was still very much scarred by the July 2005 assassination of two Algerian diplomats in Baghdad, and that no official investigation or condolences had ever come from the Iraqi government. Ambassador said this was an important and legitimate concern, one shared by other countries whose diplomats had been killed, but it was also important for the stability of the region to re-engage Iraq. Bouzaher acknowledged that it was time for Algeria "to clarify its relations with Iraq," particularly since Iraqis had supported Algeria during its war for independence.

COMMENT

17. (S) Bouzaher was part of an Algerian business delegation led by Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia that visited Damascus in October, signing several economic and commercial agreements. He confided that in other areas such as security, there had been less progress. He referred to a bilateral draft agreement between Algerian and Syrian intelligence and security services that had been pending for some time and was still not signed, as "our services still have much to clarify to make sure we understand" Syrian intentions. We delivered the demarche and non-paper to Bouzaher at a propitious time - we left his office at 1545, and he was heading into a meeting with Foreign Minister Mourad Medelci at 1600, presumably to discuss the imminent visit of al-Asad, among other things.
PEARCE